

Home : News :

# Planning rural America — Indiana leads

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As Congress crafts the Farm Bill and looks for ways to help rural America, it should cast a glance toward Indiana. There, hundreds of Hoosiers from all walks of life have been hammering out a vision of, and path to, a brighter future for rural counties. The result: a framework called the Rural Indiana Strategy for Excellence, aka RISE 2020. (Disclosure: I helped edit the strategy. I claim no credit, however, for its substance; I merely applaud it.)

In a nutshell, RISE 2020 consists of a foundation and seven pillars. The foundation comprises all who care about rural Indiana, united in common cause not divided by parochial interests. A rural constituency. A rural voice. Including — importantly — urbanites and suburbanites who recognize the value of rural areas.

Standing upon that foundation are seven interconnected pillars:

**Regional Frameworks.** Challenges in rural Indiana don't stop at the city or county line, yet all too often we compartmentalize our thinking according to such boundaries. That's got to change. We've got to think and act regionally.

**Civic Leadership and Engagement.** Leadership is critical to the future of rural communities. We must increase the pool of leaders and enhance their ability to serve. As part of that, we've got to reinvigorate citizenship.

**Asset-Based Community Development.** Rural Indiana has many assets upon which to build — people, churches, businesses, theaters, hospitals, libraries, community colleges, parks, and on and on. They often get overlooked. We need to identify them, see them as valuable and leverage them for the good of the community.

**Innovation and Entrepreneurship.** Rural communities need an attitude that says both "we can do it" and "it's okay to try and fail." In business, we need to grow our own jobs rather than rely on outside companies to provide them. In public service, "the way things have always been done" doesn't work anymore. We've got to come up with new ways that make sense for today's world.

**Inclusiveness.** It isn't enough for some to take part in making our communities better, nor for some to enjoy the fruits of a better community. We must ensure that all are invited, welcomed, enabled and even celebrated.

**Youth Engagement.** We worry about the brain drain taking our kids away from us, but fail to involve them in the decisions that shape not just our communities, but also their lives. If we want our youth to have a place to prosper, we need to involve them in building that place.

**Wealth Creation and Retention.** Contrary to popular opinion, rural Indiana has wealth. We need to identify that wealth and provide the education and means for donors to put it to use locally.

Sam Cordes co-directs Purdue University's Center for Regional Development and has a long career in rural policy research and advocacy. He says that the potential for RISE 2020 tops anything he's seen, for three reasons. One, its broad constituency (the foundation) goes far beyond traditional agriculture and rural interests to include everyone who has a stake in rural Indiana. Two, it doesn't rely solely on government for its care and feeding; rather, key institutions — governmental and nongovernmental—are committed to supporting it. Three, the pillars provide a much better — i.e., holistic and integrative — view of rural challenges and opportunities than the age-old stove-pipe focus on sectors such as health care, education, economic development, etc.

Two of those previously mentioned key institutions are already helping turn the potential into progress. The Indiana Office of Community and Rural Affairs is using RISE 2020 to guide its programs and funding. The non-profit Indiana State Rural Development Council — RISE 2020's organizational home — is helping citizens and communities figure out how the pillars fit together and apply them on the ground. Council Director Phil Anderson says, "It's helping people connect a lot of dots in a lot of ways. You see people nodding and saying 'gosh, that makes sense.'"

For her part, Lt. Governor Becky Skillman, who initiated the plan, is pleased with the effort and what it means for rural Indiana and, perhaps, even rural America. In a written statement, she called RISE 2020 the first effort of its kind in the nation and "a model for others seeking to realize the potential that exists in rural areas."

She's right. Congress, are you watching?

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